DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 879 CS 203 843

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TITLE Individualized Instruction: Kick the Kit and Can Habit.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977) ; Reproduced from the best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Individualized Instruction; *Individualized Programs; *Interaction; Peer Teaching; Performance Based Education; Performance Contracts; *Programed Materials; Reading Instruction; Small Group Instruction; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Too often, teachers working with individualized instructional programs turn the instruction over entirely to kits, packets, and canned commercial materials and abandon all meaningful teacher/student and student/student interaction. This paper urges teachers to avoid a total dependence on commercial and teacher-made learning packets. It examines the learning problems that can develop when students are taught entirely from "kits and cans," describes typical reading-lab lessons that reflect inadequate approaches to teaching reading, stresses the advantages of an individualized program that involves interaction, and offers suggestions for establishing workable individualized programs for both large and small classes. The suggestions deal with such aspects of an individualized program as using peer tutors, working with small groups, and helping students to develop individual contracts. (GW)

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INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION: KICK THE KIT AND CAN HABIT

A Paper Prepared for NCTE
1977 Convention

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INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION: KICK THE KIT AND CAN HABIT

Elle Billiard

Individualized instruction has been promoted as one of the best ways of meeting the learning needs of students today; therefore, in the recent years many forms of individualized programs have evolved. But more and more, it has become not individualism but rather ISOLATION for the student; and more and more, the teacher is abdicating her position by turning the instruction entirely over to kits, packets, and canned commercial materials.

As I have visited learning labs and classroom throughout the South on a consultant basis, I am surprised to find, time after time, the repetition of this type of individualization being used. The student enters the classroom or lab, selects a folder, pulls some kit, canned commercial material, or programmed instruction text from the shelves and isolates himself in a booth, carrell, or at a table to work the entire class period without a single exchange of a word with anyone. Then he leaves the room just as quietly after turning in the pages of "busy work" he has completed to the teacher. The role of the instructor has become that of merely planning the student's individualized work, grading his papers (and sometimes not even this as the student often grades his own work with varying degrees of accuracy), and finally becoming an evaluator as he assigns grades to the finished papers. He may even go so far as to make a personal comment on an answer sheet... "Excellent. Do 10 more." or "You do not understand this concept. Go to Book F and try again."

Yes, this is called individualized instruction in all too many classes. But it is not good teaching nor learning practice because there is no communication, very little interest or incentive on the

student's part, and certainly no relationship between the teacher and the student of any sort.

Individualization has about as many definitions as there are letters in the word. Basically, it is a course of study or a contract set up for a particular student by the instructor to take the student from where he is in knowledge or skill to the desired goal or competency required of the course. It differs in several ways from other individualized contracts for other students in the same course and ought to contain a variety of competencies to be met using many basic and supplemental materials and media.

It is a method of teaching and learning which is in the forefront of up-to-date methodology and fits well into competency based programs. Usually, some basic diagnostic test or pre-assessment instrument sets up the criteria for a prescriptive course of study with a post-diagnostic test or evaluation instrument. In content areas, a personal inventory plus a teacher-made or commercial CBE pre-test leads to a contractual course of study and to a final CBE test.

To many, individualization is allowing the student to choose his own materials and move at his own pace. Essentially, it is looked upon by many as an easy way to teach for it becomes all too often a "do it yourself" task for the student. The teacher sits back and observes the labor, checks papers, records grades, and assigns more kits and canned units of work. If education in your field can be a "do it yourself" project, why does the school system need you? They could hire a clerk for this kind of service for less money...and they may catch on to this fact shortly unless some changes are made. Furthermore, proof has stacked up that "do it yourself" programmed instruction in kits and cans does not work in a large percentage of cases.

In the September issue of Learning Magazine appears an article addressed to this last statement. The article titled "Teachers and Kids Beat the System" states these facts. (Rita Dunn, 1977)

> In 1972, after a full year's operation in New York State's affluent Chappaqua school district, Westorchard Elementary School got the disheartening news: its students showed a decrease in mathematics and reading competencies, as tested by the statewide, state-mandated Pupil Evaluation Program. The test results were a blow to Westorchard teachers, who were enthusiastic about the school's new program of individualized instruction in an open environment. At the end of the second year, Westorchard students still performed more poorly than did students in the district's two other elementary schools. What was wrong with Westorchard?
>
> Three nationally respected educators who evaluated Westorchard found, in fact, that the school was suberb but that certain of its supportive, individualized practices many have worked against effective test taking:
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> 1. Because of the comfortable learning environment at the school, students were unaccustomed to the structured and rigid conditions under which the state test had to be taken.
> 2. With individualized instruction, students often read directions by themselves or with one or two other students. In taking the state test, however, students had to follow directions that were read to a large group - a situation with which Westorchard students had little experience.
> 3. In an attempt to ease the anxiety connected with taking the state test, some Westorchard teachers told students that the test was a requirement but that it was not important because the teachers, parents, and students themselves all knew how well the students were doing. Some of the children, therefore, did not take the test seriously.
> 4. Westorchard's practice of self-pacing allowed students to work productively as long as they could and then take breaks. Some of the students were unaccustomed to maintaining the sustained attention required by the state test.
>
> In the academic year following the evaluation by the panel of experts, Westorchard teachers continued their individualized program, but they also occasionally gave tests to students - to get them familiar with the formal, structured, silent, and sustained attention conditions required by some tests. To teach students to pay attention in a group, teachers increased the number of group lessons they gave. After a year of selective tightening, Westorchard students scored better on math and reading tests than did students in the other two schools in the district, and also better than children in similar districts across the state, county, and country.

When the student with the commercial or teacher-made kit is isolated from interaction with his classmates and the teacher, as happened in Westorchard, he is put in the position of having to figure out what to do and how to do it without knowing WHY it is necessary to do it. Best learning is accomplished when there is a clear purpose for the learning required. Furthermore, the directions in many of the kits, cards, boxes, and cans are so vague and nebulous that the student has difficulty figuring what he is to do. If the student is intelligent to follow such directions, he probably does not need the project! And if he can't figure out the directions, he will not be able to do it correctly and will resort to copying the answers from the key.

Recently, I counselled a student who was taking a course in Medical Terminology using a programmed instruction book as a text with an instructor who was a nurse, not a certified teacher. The assignments were consistently made in terms of pages to be covered and a test to be taken. In class there was no explanation of the new assignment nor was proper use of the text undertaken in the first session. The only motivation for doing the work was the dread knowledge that a test was upcoming. The class time was spent entirely in taking the test for that day's assignment, getting the new assignment, and passing back the previous day's test papers. This student was working full time during the day before going to school at night, so time was precious to her. Therefore, she systematically and carefully copied the answers from the answer column into her text and then tried to read the text as one would read a novel to absorb this technical knowledge and store it in her long term memory. If she had used her programmed text properly, she might have had more success. Furthermore, it was not until we examined the text did she discover it had a Glossary in the back which would have been extremely helpful to her. The ultimate outcome of

this situation was that the student was flunking the course and considering herself stupid and getting ready to drop out of college. In reality, the greater stupidity was with the instructor who did not explain how to use the book to its greatest efficiency as well as communicate with the class about the significance of the assignments. She could have further aided the class by discussing the major errors after each test to clarify reasons why answers were wrong. Making mistakes and understanding why an answer is wrong is a valid learning method which should be utilized as much as possible without punitive results.

People learn from their mistakes, whether they be physical ones or cognitive ones. But they do not learn without help in most instances. The child can burn his hand on the gas flame of a stove and still be curious about the barbeque coals on the patio and get burned again. If he had been told about fire of all kinds and the danger of the coals or heat to him, he might have avoided the second burning. An important role of the teacher is to teach from students' mistakes, especially in an inductive teaching situation, which programmed and individualized study usually is.

When a teacher abdicates her role as lead instructor and turns the teaching over to a system which makes a clerk of her and isolates the students, she may well have her competency and accountability questioned. A typical lesson from a kit of canned commercial learning skills which I found in a reading lab made an assignment like this:

Weekly Practice Assignment Sheet October 7 - 11

SRA 3A	2 cards
SRA 4A	2 cards
RFU	2 cards (your choice)
Vocabulab	2 cards
Tactics II	17 cards (identified by various numbers)
We Are Black	4 cards
Comprehension Skill Builders #1	
Six Way Paragraphs	Exercises 1 through 6

There was no indication of the level of work to be done in this assignment. In fact, "cards of your choice" were indicated. I believe that a student should have a choice in the topics involved in the work he is assigned, but that choice should fall within the level of competency he is capable of or is working toward. All of those materials have levels indicated by color code except the Comprehension Skill Builders Series and the Tactics II Kit. In the color coded mateials the student should have been placed in a color level related to evidence on his diagnostic tests and within that color section he should have his choice of cards. After these have been graded, he should be moved to the next higer level if his work met the competency required. In that way he is progressing upward in skill difficulty and learning power, yet he still has choices in what he reads and works on. The student in this instance was just working on a random mess in an unrealistic time frame. The amount of work assigned for a week's completion would take 35 hours to do according to the teacher's manuals which accompany the kits and indicate the time required to complete an assignment. Thirty-five hours of work is unrealistic when there are only five class session of 55 minutes each in a week. No wonder the student said nothing to anyone. He did not have time to speak.

Such an approach to teaching reading is the best way to discourage reading. The instructor indicated the students put in a lot of overtime in the lab and were really busy. When I asked about class discussion, she stated that there was nothing to discuss. They were all individualized so how could you discuss anything in such a program? Even this program could have been improved if she had indicated the levels of work and kept the students progressing upwards as they mastered skills. But they were just working!

In another instance, the student had a contract like this:

Contract Activity Package: Reading for the Main Idea

Terminal Behavior Objective: To learner will identify by naming in writing the main idea in a series of 20 paragraphs. At least 90% accuracy will be the required level of performance

Enabling Activities:

1. The learner will do skill development cards from Tactics II:
   - A. Card 29, exercises 1-3
   - B. Card 30, exercises 4-5
   - C. Card 31, exercises 6-7
   - D. Card 32, exercises 8-9
2. The learner will listen to the tape, "Understanding the Main Idea" from the Comprehension Skill Builder Series, Number 1.
3. Given 6 short paragraphs from Six Way Paragraphs ,the learner will identify the main idea in each. Use the Key to check your answers.
4. If the learner has successfully completed steps 1-3 with at least 85% accuracy, he should go on to Step #5. However, if he has not met the appropriate level of performance, he should review the same steps and see the teacher for instructions.
5. Selecting 5 editorials from the newspapers, the learner will identify the main idea in each article and place the articles in a folder.
6. Read Study in Depth , Chapter 2, "Getting the Main Idea" pages 19-21. Do the first 10 exercises on practice work sheets. If at least 85% Accuracy is obtained, the learner will review and prepare for the Terminal Test. However, if this level of performance is not achieved, the learner should go to Step #7
7. If additional practice is indicated, the learner will do exercises from Reading for the Main Idea , pages 3-20 exercises 1-10.

Terminal Test: Ask for the Terminal Test. After you have taken it, get the key. If you meet the criterion of 90% you are ready to move on to the next module. See the instructor for the next module.

Here again, no teacher-student interaction takes place. If the student is not successful after the first six steps, certainly he will not be able to "do it himself"and the rest of the contract is useless. In fact, the teacher should step in long before Step 7. Note also,the student evaluates himself. It would take a brave student, indeed,to admit to less than 85% accuracy at Step #3 as he realizes that to be at less

than 85% means he must do all the rest of the contract. Furthermore, what does he have to lose? The Terminal Test is self graded so he could cheat a little on that and get out of the "Main Idea" rut.

Students in these two individualized programs were, in fact, teaching themselves. They did not know the purpose of their work except that it was to improve their reading ability. They did not know why an answer was right or wrong even though the answer key was available for them to grade their work. The immediate right/wrong answer is actually the end to learning as it does not stimulate any further cognition. In the grading of their own work they can only know that they erred...not why nor the significance of the error. It is the knowing WHY, the recognition of what makes a response right or wrong that is meaningful learning which can be stored in the long term memory. It is cognition, not behavior modification, which is needed. The knowing WHY becomes a tool to solve further problems in a given area.

Furthermore, working only with teacher-made modules or commercial kits presents to the student only one point of view to compare with his own viewpoint or knowledge. Such individualization cannot help prepare him very well for the work - social world as this program isolates him from the expressions and opinions of others. He needs to hear other points of view, other possible solutions to a problem, for there usually is more than one solution. He needs to discuss and argue and learn when to keep silent, for it is a many-opinioned world. Such interaction is stimulating and exciting and promotes growth and discourages bias and prejudice. He needs to learn how to communicate with others effectively to voice his own opinions. He needs to learn to listen to others to evaluate their ideas and compare them with his own. This interaction is all essential in any learning program.

To have a successful individualized program which will enable students to reach their competency goals requires a great deal of effort on the teacher's part and much flexibility; but once a program is set up with basic and supplemental materials, the class to class implementation becomes easy and satisfying. Let me urge you to kick the Kit and Can habit. Get away from total dependence upon commercial and teacher-made packets of learning skills. I need to stress I am not campaigning against commercial and teacher-made products for I use them myself; but I am against total reliance upon them to the detriment and isolation of the student from interaction with the class and the instructor. Every individualized program needs a variety of kits and canned materials from which the instructor and the student can select according to his needs and interests. It is sort of like the patient who goes to the doctor with an ailment. When the doctor determines the patient's kind of illness, the doctor can choose from several possible medications for its treatment; yet he has to keep in mind the patient's allergies and the medicine's side-effects. Then he prescribes. But even then, the prescription is to be taken until the symptoms cease, and no longer. Rarely do you take the whole bottle of medicine unless you are dealing with a virus in which over-kill is necessary or with a chronic on-going ailment. So, with the student in the individualized class: The teacher must know his needs and make a prescription to suit. There should be a variety of medicines from which to select with the premise that when the illness is cured, the medicine stops. No over-dosing!

The individualized contracts which I spoke of were not uncommon; in fact, they are typical of what goes on now in many such programs. They do contain massive over-dosing. Also, there is limited access to the doctor, which would be frightening if you were ill. You would want to be under observation during a medical treatment and have a new medication

ready in case the first one did not work. So it is with students. They need to be under observance all the time to see how they are progressing and the medication needs to be withdrawn when it is no longer needed or changed if it is not effective.

For many instructors the very thought of getting out of the lecture syndrome is like losing a security blanket. Any content area can be individualized, but many fear that by doing so they will lose control and not be able to cover the course. Many are fearful of student interaction or that it will lead away from the content. You can control this and student interaction can often help you make your strongest point as they express their own experiences in the area under discussion. Once you try individualization with interaction you will know the rewards of rapport with your students and you will find you are learning, too.

How can you individualize your large class of 30 to 80 students? Let me ask other questions before we answer this one. In your regular method of teaching, how well do you get to know your students by the end of the term? Are you aware of early potential failures? What do you do about them? Herein lies the weakness of the whole class approach to teaching with the textbook, lectures, and student reports. The class remain anonymous with the instructor not really knowing much about the success of the students in coping with the content until about mid-term. Often, then, it is too late even if he is willing to take the time and trouble to seek out and aid struggling students.

In an individualized methodolgy, the instructor can develop peer tutors to aid those who need help as soon as it becomes apparent. In a correctly structured program, that is known early and there is time to get supplemental materials, filmstrips, cassettes, or tutors to the student.

With pre-planning on the goals of your course, you can break up your large class into small groups in several ways. One way is to give each group of 5 (or whatever number you choose) a topic to work on for a specific period of time and to report back to the whole group in some manner. Each group should have a different topic, all encompassing the subject area you are teaching. In another version of this grouping, each group can have the same major topic to work on and report back at a set time. Even if all are working on the same topic, by the sheer fact that they are diversified they will approach the topic differently and you will have some new ideas introduced in the reporting sessions.

A second way to individualize is to pre-test in your content area. Give the whole class a test covering the competencies they are to have mastered at the end or give a test on the vocabulary peculiar to your discipline and see how well they score. Place those with similiar scores into small groups and give them materials and topics suitable to their capabilities . Let them cover the subject matter needed to reach your goals but with material other than the main text and lectures. In this situation, lecture briefly, use the text, but give them time to utilize other materials. And be sure they comeback to interact with the whole class often.

A third way to is pre-assess and mix the groups with strong and weaker students. In this way you build in peer tutors for each group. Let the better students help the poorer ones. Again, you can lecture briefly, use the text, but rely upon supplemental things and class input to clinch objectives. You, as the instructor, can work each day with a single group or several briefly, one at a time, and get to know each student better while you guide the groups to the logical competencies they need to master.

These are methods of individualizing work which give each student a chance to interact with other students and you on a one to one basis as well as in a whole group discussion. In these large group methods, if the instructor can start the class or end the class session with a general discussion of the topic at hand, you are providing an overview and purpose for attacking the subject which gives more meaning to learning , or you are providing a summary of main ideas and reinforcing what they have discovered on their own. But you are all working together, interacting, and communicating. You know when someone is having trouble and you are in control to help further. You as instructor, keep in touch, lead, suggest, and evaluate constantly. Your teaching will become more exciting as you get reactions verbally from your students and your class will be more gratify to you.

In a small class, individualizing can take another tack as well as follow the methods previously discussed for large groups. The small class can work on a prescriptive or contractual basis with each student having his own individual study contract. Such contracts should follow the needs revealed in a pre-assessment of some sort and should be directed toward the general goal of the course. Time should be set aside for whole class discussions of basic skills or concepts which all need to know or review. The remainder of the class can be spent with the individual students working on their own contracts to develop the competencies they need. Better students can serve as peer tutors in such class arrangements as they are needed.

Such methods allow students to hear other students' ideas and communicate their own thoughts on the subject. All this develops confidence and communication so vital to success in the work world and the academic world. In the small class, the teacher can also keep in touch

individually as the students work a part of the period on their own level and materials. Teacher recognition and attention is a powerful incentive to learning. The use of peer tutors lets a new dimension of knowledge be unleashed. Students relate to each other often better than they do with the teacher, and students helping students is utilizing a heretofore untapped resource. Peer tutors abound in every content area and should be organized and used by your student services division. You can build in rewards for tutors in several ways: awards at honors day ceremonies,work/study money, or even a credit point or two of every hour they tutor in a quarter. Furthermore, tutors often volunteer if they know they can help just for the ego trip tutoring provides.

Do not launch into an individualized program until you have carefully thought out your goals and found supplemental aids to your textbook. You need lots of kits and cans for variety to reach the levels of your students' abilities. But don't let the kits and can take over your class. Kick the habit and take charge of your class. You spent years and money mastering your field. Use this knowledge to teach, but augment it, supplement it, by individualizing your program with other things. Do not isolate your students with over-dosages of busy work. Keep in touch with reality.

Five important "I's" in managing a workable individualized program are these:

1. INDIVIDUALIZATION. Really make the program fit the students, not the students to the program.
2. INTERACTION. Communicate daily with all students and let them have input with each other, for the exchange of ideas lets new points of view and broader aspects of life evolve.

3. INTEGRATION. Use the content material of other areas in your program to broaden the base of learning. Content areas should not be isolated subject areas, but should attempt to reinforce each other as much as possible. For example, in literature, use history texts and reports to supplement the happenings or mood of the times in your novel.

4. IMAGINATION. Let your mind go free to create supplemental materials. There are ideas everywhere - on TV, in newspapers, magazines, and the library media resource person. Be flexible in what you use and how you use it.

5. INCENTIVE. Motivation and incentive to learn come from teaching styles which make the student the center of the learning system. When he can see why he does what he does, when he can have input, when he can discern your interest in him as a person, he will prosper.

Kick the kit and can habit. Individualize, but do not isolate your students. Do not abdicate your job to commercialism and become a mere clerk recording grades.

Be the teacher you were meant to be!

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